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ABSTRACT

This study explored the processes that lead to relatively lower academic performance among African American students. It has been suggested that African American students perceive that, because of discrimination, education is less useful as a tool for upward mobility for African Americans than it is for members of other ethnic groups. The nature of African American beliefs about the relationships between perceptions of discrimination and grades was studied with 40 African American high school and 120 African American college students. The study expanded the group-specific scale devised by R. A. Mickelson (1990) into four independent subscales. Results suggest that perceptions of discrimination do predict grades, but this relationship is mediated by the student's academic self-esteem and moderated by the level of racial centrality, a construct that measures the extent to which being black is part of one's self-concept. Different types of experiences with discrimination appear to be related to different types of experiences and predict different educational outcomes. In general, the hypothesis that academic self-esteem mediates race-specific educational utility and grades was supported. (Contains four tables and four references.) (SLD)

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# Perceptions of Discrimination and Achievement in African American Students

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Abstract:

The current study attempts to help us better understand the process that leads to relatively lower performance in African American students. It has been suggested that African American students perceive that, because of discrimination, education is less useful as a tool for upward mobility for African Americans than for members of other groups. The current study explores the nature of African Americans beliefs about the relationships between perceptions of discrimination and grades in African American high school and college students. Results suggest that perceptions of discrimination do predict grades, but this relationship is mediated by the student's academic self-esteem and moderated by their level of Racial Centrality.

Poster presented at the annual Conference of the American Psychological Association in Toronto, Ontario. August 12, 1996

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## Introduction

African American students have been shown to have highly positive attitudes toward education, but relatively poor performance in school when compared with White or Asian students (Stevenson, Chen & Uttal, 1990; Steinberg, Dornbusch & Brown, 1992). Mickelson (1990) suggested that all students hold two sets of attitudes toward education. One set of attitudes is general and does not vary much across groups. These attitudes suggest that education is an important key to success. The second set of attitudes is specific to the individual's experiences and perceptions of opportunities for people like them. African American students, for instance, may understand that education is useful in general, but may perceive that, because of discrimination, education is less useful for African Americans. Because they are based on actual experience, this second set of attitudes is best related to performance. Thus, the general attitudes being measured by many studies did not predict performance because they were not based on personal experience and perceptions.

The current study is designed to advance some of the notions offered by Mickelson and others. It expands Mickelson's group-specific scale into four independent subscales. This allows specific questions about the nature of race-specific educational utility (RSEU) to be answered. Students may believe that, for African Americans, discrimination in the workplace hinders rates of payment and promotion. Or they may put forth less effort in school because they have seen their parents discriminated against. Another suggestion that is not race-based is that African American students may believe that there are alternative pathways to success and that there are few negative consequences to not getting a good education (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992).

Although Mickelson's study provides a provocative starting point, it does not suggest potential mediators between RSEU and performance. One suggestion is that

RSEU influences the way that the student feels in the classroom (academic self-esteem). This relationship may also be moderated by the centrality of race to the individual's self-concept. Race-specific attitudes should only predict behavior to the extent that race is an important part of one's self-concept. Previous research has demonstrated that Racial Centrality moderates relationships between race-specific attitudes and outcomes such that there is no relationship between attitudes and outcomes in individuals for whom race is relatively unimportant, but there is a significant relationship for individuals for whom race is important (Rowley, Sellers, Smith, & Chavous, 1996). By not measuring racial centrality when assessing race-specific attitudes, researchers are implicitly assuming that race is equally important to all African Americans. It is expected that Racial Centrality should moderate the relationship between race-specific beliefs about the utility of education and academic outcomes and that academic self-esteem should mediate that relationship.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

*Question 1.* How is race-specific educational utility related to demographic variables (i.e., parental education, family income, neighborhood and school racial composition, and inter-racial contact)?

*Hypothesis 1.* It is expected that students from neighborhoods with fewer African Americans, schools with *more* African Americans, parents with less education, lower contact with Blacks and higher contact with Whites will have ***higher*** levels of race-specific educational utility.

*Question 2.* How is race-specific educational utility related to student performance?

*Hypothesis 2.* It is expected that the *positive* effect of RSEU will be ***mediated*** through academic self-esteem.

*Question 3.* Does Racial Centrality *moderate* the relationships among RSEU and achievement?

*Hypothesis 3.* It is expected that RSEU will only predict performance for those high in Racial Centrality, but not for those with low levels of Racial Centrality.

**Methods**

Subjects were 160 African American students. Forty of the students were high school students surveyed at an after-school program in a large southeastern city. One hundred twenty of the students were surveyed at one of two large universities, also in southeastern United States. None of the students were compensated monetarily for their participation, but the college students did receive class credit for their participation.

*Measures*

Race-specific Educational Utility (RSEU) was measured with 16 items measuring the extent to which education is useful for African Americans specifically. Each of the four subscales are measured by four items. All subscales are coded from less to more useful (i.e., a low score on discrimination against the family would indicate perceiving *more* discrimination against the family). All subscales indicated adequate reliability (ranging from .66 to .75).

Discrimination Against the Family -- measures perceptions that family members have been discriminated against (e.g., My parents have faced barriers to success)

Alternative Pathways -- measures perceptions of the existence of paths to success other than education (e.g., People who fail in school can still become successful).

Workplace Discrimination -- measures perceptions of the "glass ceiling". The glass ceiling is the phenomenon where, because of discrimination, certain individuals, usually because of race or gender, can only advance so far in the business world (e.g., Discrimination in

the workplace makes education less effective for Blacks).

Educational Utility for Blacks -- measures perceptions that education is as useful for African Americans as it is for others (e.g., Education usually pays off in the future for Blacks).

Hare Academic Self-Esteem Scale (ASE) is a 10-item scale measuring the extent to which the student feels comfortable and competent in the classroom.

Racial Centrality is a 10-item subscale of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Sellers et. al., 1996) measuring the extent to which being Black is a part of one's self-concept.

Inter-racial Contact is 16 items measuring contact in social, romantic and academic settings with Blacks and Whites. Two subscales are created -- contact with Blacks and contact with Whites.

**Results**

Table 1 contains correlations between demographic variables and RSEU subscales. Although several of the expected correlations were not significant, those that were generally supported our hypotheses. Neighborhood and school composition, and contact with Whites were unrelated to RSEU subscales. Mother ($r = .29$, $p < .01$) and father ($r = .32$, $p < .01$) education were positively related to perceptions of discrimination against the family. Contact with Blacks was negatively related to alternative pathways ($r = -.20$, $p < .05$) and positively related to educational utility for Blacks ($r = .28$, $p < .01$). Although this relationship with educational utility for Blacks was expected, it was hypothesized that alternative pathways would be positively related to contact with Blacks.

Direct relationships between RSEU subscales and academic self-esteem and grades were also generally as expected (See Table 2). Both full models were significant. It was surprising that alternative pathways was negatively related to ASE ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .01$), but unrelated to grades. Educational utility for Blacks was positively related to ASE and

grades. Discrimination against the family and perceptions of workplace discrimination were unrelated to ASE and grades.

The mediational model where ASE mediates the relationship between RSEU and grades was supported (See Table 3). Baron and Kenny (1986) suggest a three-step approach to proving mediation. The first is to demonstrate the significant relationship between the first group of variables (in this case RSEU) and the outcome variable. The second step is to demonstrate the direct influence of the mediator (i.e., ASE) on the outcome variable. The third step is to show the diminished relationship between the first group of variables and the outcome when the mediator is included in the regression model.

To test for a potential moderator effect of Racial Centrality on the relationship between RSEU and grades, two Centrality groups, one high and one low, were created by a median split. Multiple regressions were then fit separately for the two Centrality groups. Results of the regressions are in Table 4. First, it should be noted that the full model for the low Centrality group was non-significant ($R^2 = .10$, $p > .05$), but significant for the high Centrality group ($R^2 = .22$, $p < .05$). Racial Centrality did moderate RSEU and grades such that the beta weight for educational utility for Blacks and grades was non-significant for those low in Centrality, but significant for the high Centrality group. Further, the alternative pathways subscale was significant in the high Centrality group, but not in the low Centrality group.

## Discussion

Our hypotheses were generally supported. This measure of race-specific educational utility was demonstrated to be valid and had relationships with academic and self-esteem as generally expected. Further, diversity in the results suggests that it is helpful to separate the four subscales. Different types of experiences with discrimination appear to be related to different types of experiences and predict different outcomes.

RSEU subscales were related to experience with other African Americans. Relationships, however, were specific according to subscale. Contact with Blacks was

related to perceptions of alternative pathways and educational utility for Blacks, but not to perceptions of workplace discrimination and discrimination against the family. Parental education levels were postively related to perceptions of discrimination against the family (i.e., more education is related to lower perceptions of discrimination). Interestingly, neighborhood and school racial compositions were unrelated to RSEU.

In general, the hypothesis that ASE mediates RSEU and grades was supported. Alternative pathways and educational utility predicted ASE, which predicted grades. Further, those relationships were diminished when ASE included in the regression with RSEU and grades. Note that close to 40% of the variance in grades was explained in any model that included ASE. Interestingly, alternative pathways was negatively related to ASE suggesting that perceptions that education is *not* the only route to success resulted in better performance. This is consistent with previous studies using Mickelson's scale (Johnson, 1995). It is possible that for African Americans, it is better to acknowledge other possibilities for success than to narrowly focus on academics; especially in the face of failure.

Racial Centrality was demonstrated to be a moderator of RSEU and grades, such that alternative pathways and educational utility for Blacks positively predicted grades in those high in centrality, but there were no significant relationships in those low in centrality. This point is especially important. New information about the relationship of perceptions of discrimination and grades was extracted simply by assessing the role of Racial Centrality. Perceptions of discrimination do not always lead to diminished performance. If being African American is unimportant to the individual, perceptions of discrimination have little or no affect on their performance in school.

**Table 1: Correlations among RSEU and Demographic Variables**

| | Neighbor-hood | School | Father Education | Mother Education | Contact w/ Blacks | Contact w/ Whites |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Discrimination Against Family | -.11 | -.09 | .32** | .29** | .07 | .05 |
| Alternative Pathways | .05 | -.04 | .07 | .07 | -.20* | -.01 |
| Workplace Discrimination | -.07 | -.09 | -.08 | .03 | .13 | .03 |
| Educational Utility | -.08 | -.14 | .10 | .09 | .28** | .17 |

**Table 2: Multiple Regresssion RSEU and Achievement (Academic Self-Esteem/Grades)**

| | B | β | $R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Discrimination against Family** | .06/-.07 | .08/-.10 | |
| **Alternative Pathways** | -.17/-.01 | -.21 */-.0 | |
| **Workplace Discrimination** | .09/-.07 | .11/-.09 | |
| **Educational Utility** | .16/.21 | .22 */.36 | |
| | | | .13*/.11 |

**Table 3: Multiple Regresssion with ASE as a mediator of RSEU and Grades**

| | B | β | $R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| Discrimination against Family | -.08 | -.13 | |
| Alternative Pathways | .03 | .05 | |
| Workplace Discrimination | -.10 | -.09 | |
| Educational Utility | .12 | .21 | |
| Academic Self-Esteem | .42 | .55** | |
| | | | .39** |

**Table 4: Multiple Regresssion Racial Centrality as a Moderator (Low Centrality/High Centrality)**

| | B | β | $R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| Discrimination against Family | -.12/-.0. | -.19/-.0< | |
| Alternative Pathways | -.12/-.2: | -.16/-.3$ | |
| Workplace Discrimination | -.12/.16 | -.11/-.2< | |
| Educational Utility | .14/.24 | .20/.51' | |
| | | | .10/.2 |



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